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SUBJECT: MAURITANIA: 2009 COUNTRY REPORTS ON TERRORISM

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[1](#)1. (U) Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) represented the primary terrorist threat to Mauritania. After two attacks in late December 2007 and two others in 2008, including the February attack against the Israeli embassy and the September Tourine attack that cost the lives of 11 soldiers and their civilian guide, AQIM significantly increased its level of activity and severity of attacks. In 2009:

- On November 29, three Spanish aid workers traveling in a caravan from Nouadhibou to Nouakchott were kidnapped by gunmen in an attack claimed by AQIM.

- On June 23, American citizen Christopher Leggett was murdered by two gunmen upon arriving at his workplace in Nouakchott. AQIM claimed responsibility for the murder, stating Leggett was targeted for Christian proselytizing activities.

- On August 8, a suicide bomber affiliated with AQIM detonated his explosive belt next to the French Embassy compound in Nouakchott. There were no fatalities other than the attacker. This marks the first suicide bomber attack in the history of the country.

[1](#)2. (U) The lawless eastern and northern regions of Mauritania were a haven for smugglers and terrorists. The porous borders with Algeria, Mali, and Western Sahara posed ongoing challenges for the ill-equipped and poorly funded Mauritanian security services. In the case of the Leggett murder and the suicide bomber attack, terrorists entered Mauritania from outside the country with the sole intention of carrying out operations. Through the year, there were specific threats against U.S. interests and citizens in Mauritania.

[1](#)3. (U) The August 6, 2008 coup d'etat against democratically elected President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi resulted in the suspension of all U.S. government non-humanitarian assistance, including most military cooperation and counterterrorism training to the junta-led government. Constitutional order was restored eleven months after the coup following Abdallahi's resignation and the naming of a transitional government of national unity that led the country to presidential elections on July 18, won by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and recognized by the international community. The U.S. government re-initiated its military cooperation with the newly formed Mauritanian government in September. Programs focusing on counterterrorism include the Counterterrorism Fellowship Program and Special Forces Training of Military CT units under the Joint Combined Exercise Training Program. Prior to the coup, the U.S. provided counterterrorism training to two Mauritanian units and now plans to continue strengthening military capacity.

¶4. (U) In response to the increased terrorist threat in Mauritania, the government strengthened roadblocks and road security. In November, authorities announced the creation of a new Road Security Agency in charge of monitoring terrorist activity and all forms of trafficking in Mauritanian roads. The government has consistently exhibited a willingness to cooperate with the U.S. to prevent and deter future acts of terrorism. Mauritanian authorities have been highly responsive to U.S. requests for security support, both for routine operations as well as special events, despite security forces' somewhat limited means. American security officials enjoy open access to their Mauritanian counterparts. Also, although the new government does not yet have a formal strategy to counter extremism, it has demonstrated a willingness to assist the U.S. in implementing counter-extremism programs.

¶5. (U) The Mauritanian government has displayed a willingness to both investigate and apprehend individuals involved in acts of terrorism against U.S. citizens or interests, as shown by the arrest of the entire terrorist cell responsible for planning and executing the Leggett murder. Two members of the cell were apprehended on July 17 and the remaining members were taken into custody mere days later. The government has stated its intention to try these individuals.

¶6. (U) As of December 31, the Mauritanian government held in custody approximately 66 terrorist suspects. Approximately thirteen of them have already been prosecuted and sentenced. In July, the Nouakchott court condemned Abdel Jelil Ould Biye and Teyeb Ould Saleck, two terrorists who participated in the 2005 Lemgheity attack, to eight and seven years respectively. In November, the government of Senegal extradited to Mauritania three Mauritians allegedly implicated in the August 8 suicide bomber attack against the French Embassy.

¶7. (U) In order to improve regional coordination in the fight against terrorism, Mauritania participated in an August 12 meeting in Tamanrasset (Algeria) with chiefs of staff from Algeria, Mali, and Niger to draft a counterterrorism strategy for the Sahara. According to the agreement, Mauritania will deploy 4,000 soldiers to secure its borders with Mali and Algeria. Mauritania has a strong bilateral military and counterterrorism cooperation with France.

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